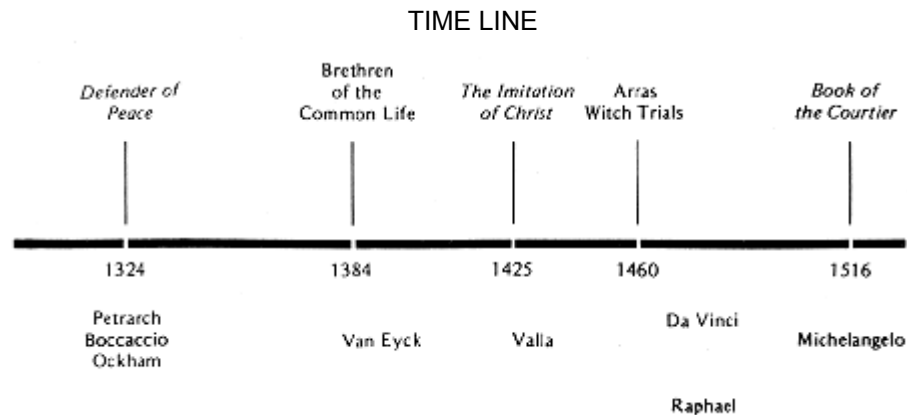


REVIEW GUIDE FOR THE RENAISSANCE



THE RENAISSANCE

The term "renaissance" ("rebirth" in French) was introduced by Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), an Italian art historian who wrote of the rebirth of art in Italy during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The concept of the Renaissance was then applied more broadly to describe a dramatic rebirth of civilization in Western Europe. This view of the Renaissance involves two erroneous concepts. First, there is the idea that the Middle Ages had few cultural accomplishments to their credit. Second, there is the idea that, sometime around 1350, a sudden rebirth of literature, art, and scholarship began in Italy.

These views overlook the accomplishments of medieval European civilization, especially those of the High Middle Ages from about 1000 to 1300. During this period, Romanesque and Gothic architecture emerged, the first universities were established, and scholastic philosophy developed.

What occurred in Italy beginning in the fourteenth century was not, therefore, a sudden rebirth but rather a continuation of what had been underway for several centuries, although there were some significant shifts in emphases. Above all, the Italian Renaissance involved an intensification of interest in the classical civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome, especially in classical literature, thought, art, and architecture. In addition, the Italian Renaissance brought an intensification of the secular spirit in Western European civilization. This meant an increasing concern with the things of this world rather than with eternity and a new emphasis on the individual and individual accomplishment.

How distinctive was the Renaissance as a period in European history? The Italian Renaissance, many historians agree, was not a complete break with the outlook and institutions of the Middle Ages; rather, it was an artistic and intellectual transformation of an urban elite, characterized by rationalism, secularism, individualism, and humanism. A wealthy merchant and banking class enriched by trade and commerce in the cities of Genoa, Milan, and Florence patronized the arts and education. Ruling dynastic families such as the Medicis in Florence and the Sforzas in Milan with their condottieri, or mercenary soldiers, defeated their rivals and promoted the signs of their wealth. Building extensive libraries and commissioning artistic masterpieces from Michelangelo and Benvenuto Cellini (1500-1571), among others these rulers competed with the growing material power of the Catholic church in influence and prestige.

Italy's geographical location as the crossroads of the Mediterranean trade, with abundant seaports where travelers mixed and profits mounted, helps to explain the cultural expansion. But Italy was also the home of the ancient Romans, and relics of Greco-Roman antiquities abounded to inspire imitation. Humanists revered the ancient classical authors like Plato and Socrates and developed educational programs based on their study. According to Castiglione (*The Courtier*, 1528), the

court gentleman must be widely educated to paint, sing, wrestle, ride, converse in many languages, speak eloquently, and write skillfully.

Political Theory

In the realm of political theory, Machiavelli (*The Prince* 1513), revolutionized the science with his pragmatic prescriptions for obtaining and maintaining power. Since men are naturally selfish and corrupt, Machiavelli wrote, the prince must be as cunning as a fox and as ferocious as a lion in his dealings with them. He must be able to manipulate men's emotions and feelings, understanding that it is better to be feared than loved by his people. Christian teachings were irrelevant in the prince's pursuit of power. Political ends justified whatever means, however brutal, the prince employed.

Realism in Art

An artistic breakthrough to realism is found in the works of Michelangelo, da Vinci, Raphael, and Botticelli that illustrate the ways in which Christian and Greco-Roman themes converge. Michelangelo's *David* conveys the Greek ideal of beauty with its classical proportions, anatomical perfection, and glorification of the human body. The biblical David is portrayed as an independent moral agent who embodies reason and free will, and exhibits virtue, the striving for personal excellence. The Medici placed the statue before the city hall in Florence as a symbolic defender of the republic. To the humanists, republican government was a superior form because it invited the participation of citizens in the dialogue of governing on which human progress depended.

Literary Criticism

The humanists studied the Latin classics and literary culture of the ancient world with deep interest. A famous humanist was Lorenzo Valla (1407-1457), who used historical criticism to discredit an eighth-century document giving the pope Italy and the entire Western empire. Analyzing the language in the document, he proved that it could not have been written in the fourth century and was, in fact, forged in the eighth century.

NORTHERN RENAISSANCE

Growing prosperity and the printing press carried Renaissance culture to northern and Western Europe, to England and the Low Countries (now Belgium and Holland). The Christian humanists Erasmus (*In Praise of Folly*, 1509) and Thomas More (*Utopia*, 1516) were advocates for the deeply religious character that distinguished the northern Renaissance from its Italian counterpart.